

# How to Trace Your Immigrant Ancestors: Digging Deeper

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Statue of Liberty National Monument  
Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration



**Expanding Your Search:** Have you been unsuccessful in locating your relative's immigration records through Ellis Island's *American Family Immigration History Center* (AFIHC)? Perhaps you believe that your family came to America before or after the Ellis Island era, or that they arrived at a port of entry other than New York City. Or perhaps you've found your ancestor's ship manifest but would like additional information about their new life in America.

You may have already made use of the National Park Service fact sheet called "*How to Trace Your Immigrant Ancestors: Getting Started*." The fact sheet you're now reading will suggest some additional resources to help you with your search.

**New York Immigration Records Before Ellis Island:** Castle Garden in lower Manhattan was the Port of New York's immigration station from 1855 to 1890. It was run by the State of New York, before the Federal Government took over immigrant inspections and opened Ellis Island. The free website [www.CastleGarden.org](http://www.CastleGarden.org) contains an index to New York arrival records from 1820 through 1891. Digital images of the manifests themselves can be accessed free of charge at branches of the National Archives and at many public libraries, or by subscription at the genealogy website [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com).

**New York Immigration Records After Ellis Island:** Port of New York arrival records up to and including the year 1957 may be found in the AFIHC database on Ellis Island and online at [www.LibertyEllisFoundation.org](http://www.LibertyEllisFoundation.org), even though the Ellis Island immigration station closed in 1954.

Immigration records after 1957 are considered currently active (rather than historic) and are therefore protected by the Privacy Act, so they are not accessible by the general public. However, if you are the immigrant yourself or the relative of a deceased immigrant, the Freedom of Information Act enables you to request a copy of a more recent record from *U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services*, the federal agency that handles immigration today. Procedures for making such a request can be found at [www.USCIS.gov/about-us/freedom-information-and-privacy-act-foia/how-file-foia-privacy-act-request/how-file-foiapa-request](http://www.USCIS.gov/about-us/freedom-information-and-privacy-act-foia/how-file-foia-privacy-act-request/how-file-foiapa-request).

**Records from Other Ports of Entry:** Immigrants could enter the United States through dozens of ports and border crossings. If you are uncertain where your ancestor arrived, begin with the Port of New York, because that has been the largest port of entry throughout most of U.S. history. Ship manifests for all other ports and border crossings have now been digitized, although the exact years covered by the different ports' databases vary. These records can be accessed free of charge at National Archives branches and at many public libraries, or by subscription at [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com).

**If Your Ancestor Was Enslaved:** Enslaved persons are not normally listed by name on the cargo manifest of the ship that brought them to America. You can try to learn the names of particular enslaved ancestors by starting with family sources and then working back through public records such as census results, Freedmen's Bureau records, fugitive slave cases, wills, tax and insurance records, and manifests from domestic voyages that do list enslaved persons by name.

If you can pinpoint where, when, and by whom an ancestor was first enslaved in the United States, this provides circumstantial evidence that may help you identify the ship that most likely transported your relative. More than 35,000 voyages that brought over 12 million Africans to America are documented in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database at [www.SlaveVoyages.org](http://www.SlaveVoyages.org). Additional

resources for African American genealogy are provided by the National Archives at [www.Archives.gov/research/african-americans](http://www.Archives.gov/research/african-americans).

**Other Sources of Immigration-Related Records:** In addition to ship manifests, there are other types of records that can shed light on an immigrant's arrival in America, including naturalization records, visa applications, and census results. There are indexes of passenger records and ship voyages that can supplement today's searchable databases. Specialized immigration indexes and databases have been compiled for particular ethnic groups, ports of entry, and ports of departure.

Here are some additional resources that may help you research your family's immigration history:

- **National Archives and Records Administration (NARA):** The National Archives is the official repository for all historic U.S. Government records. If you are visiting Ellis Island, the New York branch of NARA is close by at *One Bowling Green (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor)* in lower Manhattan. You can contact them at [www.Archives.gov/nyc](http://www.Archives.gov/nyc) or by calling (866) 840-1752. The main National Archives website at [www.Archives.gov/research/immigration](http://www.Archives.gov/research/immigration) contains numerous links and suggestions that can assist you. It also lists other NARA offices that you can visit throughout the United States.
- **U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services:** This is the U.S. Government agency that handles immigration today. Their historic holdings include *naturalization records* of immigrants who applied to become citizens (1906–1956), *visa files* of those applying for permanent residence (1924–1944), and consolidated immigrant *case files* known as A-Files (1944–1951). For information on accessing these microfilm and hard-copy records, visit [www.USCIS.gov/historyandgenealogy](http://www.USCIS.gov/historyandgenealogy).
- **Ancestry.com:** This paid subscription website is a partner of the National Archives in making immigration records available to the public online. Its database includes all ship manifests that have been digitized, as well as extensive holdings of other genealogical documents such as naturalization, census, birth, marriage, and death records. *Ancestry.com* can be accessed free of charge at NARA branches and many public libraries.
- **FamilySearch.org:** This is a free genealogy website provided by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, also known as the Mormons. Theirs is the largest collection of genealogical and historical records in the world. It includes virtually all U.S. immigration records that have been digitized, as well as naturalization, census, birth, marriage, and death records.
- **Steamship Directories:** Two useful documents are the *Registers of Vessels Arriving at the Port of New York from Foreign Ports, 1789-1919* and the *Morton Allan Directory of European Passenger Steamship Arrivals*, which includes dates up to 1930. Since these publications list the names and arrival dates of all passenger ships entering the Port of New York from abroad, they can help you identify which manifests to search. Recently digitized, these publications are available online at *Ancestry.com* and *FamilySearch.org*.
- **CyndisList.com:** Cyndi's List is an online index that provides links to Internet genealogy resources of all kinds, including databases and research advice related to immigration.
- **SteveMorse.org:** This website is a clearinghouse of online resource links and research tips for locating immigration records and related genealogical information.
- **Gjenvick.com:** The Gjenvick-Gjenvik Archives is an extensive online collection of documents and images relating to steamship and ocean liner history.
- **GermanRoots.com:** This website offers links to online resources and tips for doing German genealogical research, with many of the suggestions also relevant to other ethnic groups.
- **GermanGenealogyGroup.com** and **ItalianGen.org:** These sites provide online indexes to records for the New York City metropolitan area that cover all ethnic groups, including an index to naturalization records. For their members, the German Genealogy Group and the Italian Genealogical Group provide additional resources and forums for those researching German and Italian family history respectively.
- **JewishGen.org:** Affiliated with the Museum of Jewish Heritage, this website contains extensive databases, research tools, and other resources to help those seeking Jewish ancestors. A comprehensive guide to manifest notations can be found at [JewishGen.org/infofiles/manifests](http://JewishGen.org/infofiles/manifests).